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ABSTRACT

Two variables involved in attitude change provided the basis for this study, the cognitive complexity of the subject and the dimensions of stimulus materials. After a pretest, 165 interpersonal communication students were divided into two groups according to their cognitive complexity levels. The dimensions of the stimulus were presented on two levels: information that was unidimensional and information combined with three dimensions. Results indicated that subjects were most influenced by the stimulus message that fit their conceptual structure. The study concludes that both dispositional and situational factors must be considered if a maximum attitude change is expected. (Appendixes include the following: the information, the unidimensional stimulus, the combined dimension stimulus, and the rating chart used in the study. (HAI)

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CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD AN AUTHORITY FIGURE

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Changing Attitudes Toward An Authority Figure

The area of attitude change has proven to be fertile ground for researchers in the speech-communication field. Despite the plethora of research that has been conducted, many questions remain unanswered concerning both the dispositional and situational factors that interact when positive attitude change toward an authority figure is desired. The present study dealt with the dispositional variable of cognitive complexity and the situational variable of stimulus dimensionality. The primary purpose of the research was to discover if the hypothesized interaction between the two variables was evident in a simulated organizational setting.

Individual differences related to how a person views his environment are far ranging. Some people cognitively view stimuli from their environment differently than do others. James Bieri (1961) has identified a measure of cognitive abilities that is known as "cognitive complexity" and refers to the relative differentiation of a person's construct (conceptual) system. A cognitively complex person is assumed to have more constructs with which to view the behavior of others than does the less cognitively complex person and has the ability to differentiate the behavior of others along several dimensions. The complexity of the individual is governed by the number of dimensions he views in stimulus information and is considered a dispositional factor. Different stimuli may possess varying degrees of differentiation. The number of dimensions in a given stimulus is referred to as its degree of dimensionality and is a situational factor. Cognitively complex people were hypothesized to be more influenced by stimuli that contained multiple dimensions whereas cognitively simple persons were hypothesized to be more influenced by stimuli that contained only one dimension.

The study was conducted with the cognitive complexity level of the subjects and the dimensions of the stimulus materials as the two independent variables. The subjects, 165 interpersonal communication students, were divided into two groups based upon their complexity level as determined by their scores on a measure of cognitive complexity provided by the researcher, modeled after a measure developed by

Zajonc (1954). The dimensions of the stimulus were presented along two levels. One level contained information that was unidimensional; the other contained information combined along three dimensions. The number of dimensions was determined by factor analyzing the responses of similar students in a pilot test.

The dependent variable was the difference between scores on an attitude measure administered one week before and immediately after the treatment. At the first meeting the subjects were introduced to an authority figure by means of a short vignette (see Appendix A) and asked to complete the attitude scale. At the second meeting the stimulus materials (see Appendix B & C) were presented to the appropriate groups and subjects were again asked to complete the attitude scale (see Appendix D). The attitude measure was a semantic differential scale in which five sets of bipolar adjectives were scored. The adjectives grouped along the evaluative dimension when the responses of a previously tested pilot group were factor analyzed. The adjectives used were: complete-incomplete, clean-dirty, grateful-ungrateful, fair-unfair, and good-bad. *Coefficient alpha* computed for the scale yielded a value of .81.

The 2 x 2 factorial design had virtually equal cell sizes (see Table I). The mean scores for the four cells are shown in Table II. The greatest change occurred when the cognitive complexity level of the subjects was in line with the complexity of the stimulus material. In fact, neither the complexity level nor the number of stimulus dimensions could account for significant differences when analyzed separately. Only the interaction of the two variables produced a significant finding ($p<.05$) in the two-factor fixed effects model ANNOVA (see Table III).

The results indicated that subjects were most influenced by the stimulus message that best fit their conceptual structure, i.e. simple subjects were most influenced by the unidimensional stimulus and complex subjects were most influenced by the combined dimensions stimulus. The implication for practitioners is that both dispositional and situational factors must be taken into account if maximum positive attitude change is expected. Ideally the cognitive complexity of the subjects could be measured and in-

dividualized materials prepared. Short of that, separate stimulus materials with varying degrees of dimensionality could be prepared and distributed widely in the hope that individuals would seek out and be influenced by the materials that best fit their complexity level.

Table 1. — Design and Cell Sizes for the Two-Factor Analysis of Variance

Level of Complexity	Type of Stimulus	
Simple	One Dimension	Combined Dimensions
	41	41
Complex	One Dimensions	Combined Dimensions
	41	42

Table 2. — Design and Cell Means for the Two-Factor Analysis of Variance

Level of Complexity	Type of Stimulus	
Simple	One Dimension	Combined Dimensions
	3.83415	1.26829
Complex	One Dimensions	Combined Dimensions
	1.65854	3.38095

Table 3. — Tabulation of Results of the Two-Factor Fixed Effects Model ANOVA

Source of Variation	df	MS	F	p
Factor A (complexity)	1	3.9382	0.1418	0.7071
Factor B (dimensions)	1	0.2691	0.0097	0.9218
A X B	1	172.3438	6.2085	0.0138*
Within Cells	161	27.7682		

*F-Ratio Significant at the<.05 level.

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Bieri, J. *Functions of varied experience*. eds D.W. Fiske and S.R. Maddi. Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press Inc., 1961.

Zajonc, R.B. *Cognitive structure and cognitive tuning.* Unpublished doctor's dissertation, University of Michigan, 1954.

APPENDIX A

Bill Sansom

Pack-aid Inc. is a small industiral firm located in Hammond, Indiana, that manufactures the styrofoam packaging used in shipping glassware. The firm employs 120 local workers and has been in operation for seventeen years. Bill Sansom has just been hired as the personnel manager of the firm. Bill is thirty-eight years old and has worked for the past five years as an assistant personnel director for a similar industry. Before that he had held jobs as a sales representative and a placement specialist for a private employment agency.

In his capacity as the personnel manager for the firm he will be in charge of all personnel related activities in the plant. He will direct wage and salary negotiations and be responsible for all labor relations including disputes and grievances. Bill will prepare and direct all in-service training for plant employees from assembly line workers to management staff. Bill's job will also require him to administer the health care program, direct the United Fund drive and United States Savings Bond drive.

Bill has said that he is very pleased to have obtained the position. He is also a little nervous in approaching his new position.

APPENDIX B

Unidimensional Stimulus

If you will recall the last time you met Bill, he had just been hired as the new personnel manager of Pack-aid Inc. After working at his new job for one year, the employees of Pack-aid Inc. were asked their opinions of Bill Sansom. Typical responses were:

1. "Bill Sansom is a trustworthy individual."
2. "He is friendly toward the employees in the plant."
3. "He is a strong individual."
4. "He is effective in his dealings with people."
5. "His decisions are acceptable to the employees."
6. "He is sincere in his relations with employees."

APPENDIX C

Combined Dimensions Stimulus

If you will recall the last time you met Bill, he had just been hired as the new personnel manager of Pack-aid Inc. After working at his job for one year, the employees of Pack-aid Inc. were asked their opinions of Bill Sansom. Typical responses were:

1. "Bill Sansom is a straight-forward individual."
2. "He treats employees as equals."
3. "He is informal in his dealings with employees."
4. "He acts like I would expect a personnel manager to act."
5. "He is indulgent of employees."
6. "He is a firm individual."

APPENDIX D

INSTRUCTIONS - After gaining some additional information about the man in the paragraph, please rate him on the sets of adjectives listed below. Place a check mark on the line that best describes your attitude toward him on each of the sets of adjectives. The middle blank represents a neutral position. Each interval represents a higher intensity feeling as you move from the middle position toward the ends. There are no *correct* answers. Be careful not to skip any of the sets of adjectives. Place only one check mark per set of adjectives.

Bill Sansom

incomplete___;___;___;___;___;___;___;complete

disrespectable___;___;___;___;___;___;___;respectable

true___;___;___;___;___;___;___;false

pleasant___;___;___;___;___;___;___;unpleasant

valuable___;___;___;___;___;___;___;worthless

dirty___;___;___;___;___;___;___;clean

ungrateful___;___;___;___;___;___;___;grateful

unfair___;___;___;___;___;___;___;fair

successful___;___;___;___;___;___;___;unsuccessful

good___;___;___;___;___;___;___;bad